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THE PAPERS OF
THE HYMN SOCIETY OF
AMERICA

XXXV

AFRO-AMERICAN RELIGIOUS MUSIC:

A STUDY IN MUSICAL DIVERSITY

by

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INTRODUCTION

The foundation for the development of an Afro-American religion and a corresponding musical tradition was established during the 17th and 18th centuries when missionaries were instructing blacks — free and enslaved — in the concepts of Christianity. For most blacks, their interpretation of Christian concepts and practices was based on beliefs and customs associated with African rituals rather than those stemming from doctrines of Protestant denominations. During this time and when free blacks and slaves were allowed to conduct their own religious services, two distinct and different musical traditions evolved.

One tradition results from the formal nature of church services and identifies the social attitudes of those congregational members, who strove to imitate and conform to the customs of the larger society — conformity being a prerequisite for acceptance. Among this group were free blacks and slaves. The musical tradition practiced by this smaller segment of the black population was the same as the affiliate white denomination. The masses of blacks (including some free black congregations), however, created, practiced and maintained a religious musical tradition that corresponded to their religious beliefs, social realities and life styles. The music of this tradition was different in character and style from that of white Protestants; it complimented the free structure of religious services and the black style of preaching developed by slaves which continued to be expanded upon on into the 20th century.[1]

The Afro-American religious musical tradition encompasses many diverse forms and styles. The diversity results from and reflects the broad range of social patterns, life styles and religious customs of black Americans. Many of the various musical forms and styles that comprise this religious repertoire are derived from West African musical traditions and contemporary black popular idioms, while others represent reinterpreted versions of white Protestant psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. The music that constitutes this tradition will be examined within the historical context of three centuries of religious beliefs and practices associated with the masses of American Blacks.

THE CONVERSION OF SLAVES TO CHRISTIANITY

Slavery, as a legal institution, had begun to evolve in southern and northern colonies during the latter half of the 17th century. From this time and up until the launching of a structured and unified campaign to convert slaves to Christianity, missionaries continuously expressed disapproval of the way slaves spent their free time, particularly on

Sundays. A description of an event observed by Morgan Godwin reveals some of the reasons why missionaries objected to the leisure activities of slaves:

> . . . nothing is more barbarous, and contrary to Christianity, than their . . . *Idolatrous Dances,* and *Revels;* in which they usually spend the *Sunday* . . . And here, that I may not be thought too rashly to impute Idolatry to their *Dances,* my Conjecture is raised upon this ground . . . for that they use their Dances as a *means to procure Rain:* Some of them having been known to beg this Liberty upon the Week Days, in order thereunto.[2]

Descriptions of this and other activities of West African origin support the theory that slaves did not abandon their cultural values and practices in order to adopt those of their masters.[3] Unlike missionaries, slaveholders generally did not object to these activities as long as they did not interfere with the work routine of slaves. Missionaries, throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, however, continued to express disapproval since they believed these activities were contrary to the teachings of Christianity.

In 1724, the Bishop of London initiated the first survey of religious conditions among slaves in the United States. This survey indicated that most southern slaveholders were unwilling to allow their bondsmen to receive religious instruction.[4] Many slaveholders feared that they would no longer be able to claim their slaves as property once they were baptized.[5] Missionaries and evangelists responded to their fears by assuring slave masters that neither a knowledge of Christianity nor baptism would alter the status of civil property. Knowledge of Christianity was directed toward freedom from bondage of sin and Satan rather than from outward conditions. Missionaries suggested that an awareness of Christianity could motivate stronger obligations and desires among slaves to perform their duties in a faithful, obedient and diligent manner.[6]

Slaveholders eventually accepted the viewpoint of missionaries and consented to having religious instruction of their bondsmen.[7] The diverse social structures of farms and plantations necessitated the use of a variety of approaches for instruction. Since many missionaries agreed that the master should assume the major responsibility for the religious life of slaves, a few slaveholders on small farms began to preach to slaves or to read to them from the Scriptures.[8] On large farms and plantations slaveholders

> . . . occasionally built churches on their estates and hired clergymen to preach to their bondsmen each Sunday . . . Other planters, depending upon missionaries who visited their estates periodically, made no provision for regular religious services.[9]

Slaves residing in cities and on small farms as well as domestic slaves,

generally accompanied their masters to church.[10] However, these slaves were not granted full church membership and they were not allowed to participate in church affairs nor social activities. They were required to sit either in special pews on the main floor or in the gallery.[11] Most of the sermons delivered in white churches were not made applicable to the realities and life experiences of slaves. In these churches sermons delivered were of little interest to slaves and their general responses to religious activities were negative. Congregational members, in expressing their disapproval of the behavior displayed by the slaves, complained about their ignorance, superstition, deception, indifferent reactions, lethargy and poor attendance.[12]

Missionaries and slaveholders soon became aware of the necessity to conduct separate religious services for the bondsmen. They concluded that slaves required a special type of sermon that would be especially adapted and delivered in a way so as to maintain their attention and to satisfy their religious needs.[13]

> When sermonizing among the slaves the plantation missionaries were supposed to employ pictorial and expository rather than didactic or doctrinal language. They were urged to employ familiar narratives, illustrations from every day life parables, accounts of the striking works of God, and the like.[14]

The content of these sermons represented a distorted and censored version of Christianity, since the word of God was used to justify the slaves' status in society.[15] According to Lawrence Levine, the "attempt to reduce Christianity to an ethic of pure submission was rejected and resented by the slaves."[16] The slaves' rejection of a religion defined and controlled by white intermediaries was influenced not only by the realities of their daily experiences but also by their cultural reference of an African past. As interpreted by Frazier, their acceptance of Christianity was governed by a desire to fulfill "psychological and social needs."[17] They used religion as an outlet for the release of emotions and frustrations because they were unable to express themselves through political action or any other means.[18] Religion, therefore, became an essential part of the slaves' existence. Their understanding of Christian concepts as well as their participation in religious activities was influenced by secular customs and traditions of an African past. Newbell Puckett, in his analysis of Afro-American religious beliefs, provided theoretical insights to the slaves' interpretation and practice of Christian doctrines:

> The mere fact that a people *profess* to be Christians does not necessarily mean that their Christianity is of the same type as our own. The way in which a people interpret Christian doctrines depends largely upon their secular customs and their traditions of the past. There is an infinite difference between the Christianity of the North and South in America, between that of city and country, between that of whites and colored, due in

> the main to their different modes of life and social backgrounds. Most of the time the Negro outwardly accepts the doctrines of Christianity and goes on living according to his own conflicting secular mores, but sometimes he enlarges upon the activities of God to explain certain phenomena not specifically dealt with in the Holy Scriptures.[19]

The slaves' interpretation of Christian concepts, therefore, corresponded to the traditions, practices, beliefs, ceremonies, and rituals of African religions rather than those of Euro-Americans.[20]

WEST AFRICAN RELIGIOUS CONCEPTS

The traditional form of religion practiced in West African countries represents an intimate part of the lives and daily activities of the people.[21] The West African concept of religion is centered around the belief in the powers of several gods. The universe is ruled by Great Gods, who are available for consultation when crucial and important decisions are to be made and when protection or aid is needed. Among societies in West Africa, there is no uniform tradition or practice of religious worship. Cult practices, which represent an informal mode of worship, for example,

> . . . have their humblest expression in individual worship. Sacred localities do exist, and priests have their social and religious functions to perform, but in the final analysis the rapport between a person and the invisible powers of the world are his own immediate concern, to be given over into the hands of an outsider only in times of special need.[22]

Cult groups are organized in honor of the various gods, ancestors and forces, such as Fate. These deities, ancestors and forces are believed to control and stabilize the universe.[23] Cult practices vary among the West African societies. In the large groups of Ghana, Republic of Benin, and Nigeria, the rituals are elaborate and include organized singers and dancers. Cult practices representative of smaller groups assume the form of family rituals in which various gods and ancestors are the center of the worship.[24]

The more formal mode of worship is represented by organized groups whose members receive special training. Because of this training, such groups "are regarded as vowed to the service of particular spirits or deities." The ritual of these organized groups "may be strictly followed or may be more or less improvised; . . ."[25] The concept of formal religious worship varies among the societies since the object of devotion may be a particular god, an important ancestor, or forces that are recognized by the community at large.[26]

Concepts of Christianity that were similar to African religions allowed the slave to accept the Christian God on an intellectual level

that differed from that of their counterparts. According to Richard Waterman,

> He found that Jesus, the Son of God (the only approach to a relationship — hierrarchy of supernatural beings which can be found in Protestantism), was roughly the same kind of deified human being as those with which he had been familiar in African religions, and that the Holy Ghost made an adequate substitute, as far as possession was concerned, for the deities who had possessed him in Africa. He introduced handclapping, 'shouting,' and dancing-in-place, which was about as far as he could go in substituting African ritual practices for European.[27]

Slaves, in general, adopted those concepts and practices of Christianity which could be identified with West African religious beliefs and customs. Since the concept of supernatural beings existed in both the West African and European cultures, the slaves mentally substituted their gods for the God and other supernatural forces identified with Christianity.[28]

THE BLACK PREACHER AND THE CONCEPT OF A BLACK RELIGION

An Afro-American religious musical tradition evolved in plantation "praise houses" where religious meetings were conducted by slave preachers. As more and more slaves were converted to Christianity during the late 18th century, there was an increased demand for separate services for them. Milton C. Sernett has identified four types of black preachers characteristic of this early period: ministers, exhorters, self-appointed preachers and cult leaders. According to Sernett's definition, ministers were formally trained in the Gospel and officially recognized by their respective denominations. They accompanied white clergy and preached to black and mixed audiences. Exhorters, on the other, had no formal training in the Gospel "but had a fair amount of brain, good memories, were fluent talkers, and considered pious and truthful."[29] They generally were not ordained and were not granted all the privileges of the ministerial office. Exhorters served as assistants to white missionaires; whenever they were allowed to preach, they elaborated on passages they chose from the Bible. Self-appointed preachers reportedly received their calling from God himself and did not conform to the expectations of white society. These self-appointed preachers often incited and led rebellions and, were considered radical and a threat to law and order in the south. Cult leaders practiced voodoo and witchcraft which fostered superstitions among slaves. Missionaries sought to negate the teachings of these leaders by accelerating their efforts to convert slaves to Christianity.[30]

Exhorters and self-appointed slave preachers were responsible for establishing the tradition of a unique black religion. Rather than

merely providing *instruction* in the Christian faith, they developed their own black style of preaching which emphasized congregational participation. Their sermons centered on the dramatization of Biblical stories and on the relationship between God and man.[31] Congregational members responded to chanted phrases and lines of sermons with interjections such as "Yes, Lord!," "Oh, Jesus!," "Amen, Amen," "Glory! Glory!," "Preach It!," and "Tell the Truth!" Other elements that characterized this style include (1) the use of vocal inflections, which produced a type of musical tone or chant, and facilitated the dramatic and climatic style of sermonizing; (2) the use of repetition for high-lighting phrases of text; (3) the use of rhythmic devices for stress and pacing, and (4) the use of call-response structures to stimulate congregational responses and participation.

When unsupervised by whites, black preachers interpreted Biblical passages and structured their services from the cultural perspective of their congregations. This perspective encompassed and intermingled values and practices of an African past with the reality of their existence as slaves. A visitor from the British Isles observed that the slave "prefers going to a church or meeting composed of people of his own colour, and where no whites appear. Slaves, also, sometimes, prefer places of worship where greater latitude is allowed for noisy excitement . . . than would be tolerated in the religious assemblies of white people"[32] The following two quotes summarize the character of religious meetings conducted by exhorters and self-appointed preachers and also reveal the role and importance of music in these meetings. The first description was provided by a former slave exhorter and the second was witnessed by Reverend Robert Mallard, the son-in-law of the missionary Charles Colcock Jones in 1859:

> The way in which we worshipped is almost indescribable. The singing was accompanied by a certain ecstasy of motion, clapping of hands, tossing of heads, which would continue with a cessation about half an hour; one would lead off in a kind of recitative style, others joining in the chorus . . .[33]

> Hearing singing in the neighborhood of the hotel, I went to the church from which it proceeded . . . I stood at the door and looked in — and such confusion of sights and sounds! The Negroes were holding a revival meeting. Some were standing, others sitting, others moving from one seat to another, several exhorting along the aisles. The whole congregation kept up one loud monotonous strain, interrupted by various sounds: groans and screams and clapping hands. One woman specially under the influence of the excitement went across the church in a quick succession of leaps: now down on her knees with a sharp crack that smote upon my ear the full length of the church, then up again; now with her arms about some brother or sister, and again tossing them wildly in the air and clapping her hands together and accompanying the whole by a series of short, sharp shrieks . . . Considering the mere excitement manifested in these disorderly ways, I could but ask: What religion is there in

> this? . . . Some allowance, of course must be made for the *excitability* of the Negro temperament. What better, indeed, could we expect of those who only imitate (somewhat exaggerating it, of course) the conduct of some of their masters, who should know better?[34]

The organized, yet variable structure of these religious meetings, coupled with the black style of sermonizing, fostered an intense atmosphere that accomodated a variety of individual and group forms of religious expression. Traits that describe the black style of preaching also define the essence of black religious music that was an integral part of religious meetings. The black preacher, who generally served as the song leader, interspersed and extended his sermons with improvised songs. These and other spontaneously created songs, as well as the behavior exhibited by congregational members were subject to much criticism by whites. Those who criticized simply did not understand that black religious practices, including the music, were rooted in a cultural tradition and derived from a philosophy that differed from those associated with Protestantism, Judaism, and Catholicism.

AFRO-AMERICAN RELIGIOUS MUSIC AND PERFORMANCE PRACTICES

The religious music created in and associated with "praise houses" reflected the religious beliefs, aesthetic values and musical standards of slaves. The foundation for its style was established by black preachers, whose chanted sermons and improvised songs motivated sung responses from the congregation. This musical interaction between the preacher and his congregation resulted in the creation of songs called "spirituals" in the 19th century, and "sorrow songs," "Negro spirituals" and later "black spirituals" in the 20th century.[35]

Prior to the popularization of the term "spiritual", European visitors, missionaries and American whites left written descriptions of a distinctive form of religious music sung by slaves.[36] The songs of this tradition frequently were described as combinations of yelling, hooting and screaming — the opposite of the Euro-American aesthetic of reverence and refinement. As interpreted by whites, this black vocal style did not constitute singing. The music of slaves, therefore, was considered to be "strange" and "weird" strains of disjointed and meaningless texts. Songs that comprised the religious repertoire of slaves were collectively labled and refered to by whites as "wild hymns," "wild songs," "barbaric songs," "nonsensical chants," "hallelujah songs," "plantation songs" and "songs of the slaves."[39]

Black spirituals exist in many forms and styles. Those that originated in "praise houses" are called black folk spirituals. These

spirituals can be distinguished from other types by their function, use and performance style. The black folk spiritual tradition is comprised of songs of varying origin. Many were spontaneously composed by black preachers, congregational members, and individuals. Some were African songs while others were reinterpreted versions of Protestant psalms, hymns and revival songs. In reinterpreting songs of Protestant traditions,

> melodies and rhythms were altered; original texts often were replaced by new texts; English words and phrases were combined with those of African origin; refrain lines and choruses were added; and shouts, moans, groans, cries, and word interjections were woven into the melody by slaves. A faster tempo was substituted for the original one, and complex footstamping and handclapping patterns and bodily movements were incorporated as an integral part of the performance.[38]

In general, the slaves' performances of songs taught to them by missionaries were governed by their own musical vocabulary, standards, practices and aesthetic values. White observers of slave singing as late as 1870 commented that "Watts and Newton would never recognize their productions through the transformations they have undergone at the hands of their colored admirers."[39]

Black folk spirituals expressed the slaves' interpretation of the Scripture, which was derived from *their* religious beliefs, *their* daily experiences, *their* world view and *their* desire for freedom.[40] Joseph Washington contended that Biblical vocabulary, combined with beliefs and aspirations of the slaves formed the basis for texts found in black folk spirituals. In elaborating on this thesis, he states:

> We must remember that the oral tradition was the basic method used by the missionaries to the field hands, who seldom were able to read or write, and this tradition accurately reflects the content, beliefs, and aspirations of the people involved. Thus, what issues from the spirituals is primarily the apparent tale of how slaves revolted, responded to the colonization movements, became pacific and finally placed their hopes in the world beyond as a final resort.[41]

Instead of using Biblical themes in their original context, slaves simply adopted Biblical vocabulary, stories and concepts and used them in a manner that would correspond to their daily experiences and their interpretation of Christianity. Slaves often referred to Jesus in the spirituals because he was considered to be a protector from violence and evil.[42]

Washington cites the following example to support his theory that Biblical vocabulary, rather than direct Biblical quotes, was the basis of religious references which characterized the texts of spirituals. His example also reveals the slaves' interpretation of Biblical themes:

The use of the freedom theme was extracted from the context of Christianity and was applied to the aspirations of the slaves:

> Oh Freedom! Oh Freedom!
> Oh Freedom! Oh Freedom!
> And before I'll be a slave,
> I'll be buried in my grave,
> And go home to my Lord and be free.[43]

Many spiritual texts "are marked by vivid imagery, with emphasis on metaphoric figures of speech.[44] Chase believes that a distinctive characteristic of spirituals, in the singing style," is the adaptation of the imagery and vocabulary of evangelical hymnody to concrete situations related to his own environment and experiences.[45] For example, the metaphor is commonly used in many spirituals.

> "My brother's sitting on the tree of life;" "I cast my sins in the middle of the sea;" "My sins so heavy I can't get along;" "Jesus give me a little broom for to sweep my heart clean"[46]

Personification of such things as death is occasionally used in the texts.

> "Death's gonna lay his cold icy hand on me;" "Death go from door to door" in his search for men."[47]

Events in nature were often transformed into religious experiences and were expressed in spirituals. The movement of the slow crawling inch worm, used as an analogy for a Christian, was the basis of text for some spirituals:

> Keep a-inchin' along
> Massa Jesus comin' by an' by
> Keep a-inchin' along like a po' inch worm,
> Massa Jesus comin' by an' by.[48]

Available evidence implies that texts found in black folk spirituals represents the use of Biblical vocabulary and concepts in an entirely different philosophical context than the one taught by missionaries and understood by most whites.

The performance style of songs that constituted the Afro-American religious tradition was derived from West African rather than Euro-American musical traditions. Many of these songs were improvised and employed an antiphonal structure while others consisted of repetitive lines of text. Although some songs were sung in harmony, the use of heterophony appears to have been common. Melodic structures incorporated shouts, moans, groans, cries, glides, turns, and word interjections. Accompaniment was provided by handclapping and footstamping, which, along with bodily movements and dance, became woven into the performance.[49]

The religious dance, known as the "shout", was a significant part of Sunday and weekly meetings conducted by slaves. At the end of these meetings, benches were pushed back to the wall and congregational members moved to the middle of the floor. Spirituals were sung while they walked and shuffled, one after the other, in time with the music. A description of this dance reveals that

> The foot is hardly taken from the floor, and the progression is mainly due to a jerking, hitching motion, which agitates the entire shouter, and soon brings out streams of perspiration. Sometimes they dance silently, sometimes as they shuffle they sing the chorus of the spiritual and sometimes the song itself is also sung by the dancers.[50]

Singing that accompanied the shout was frequently provided by the best singers as well as tired shouters who stood to one side of the room and clapped their hands or their knees. Often the shout continued into the middle of the night an it is said that the continuous shuffling of feet could be heard for half a mile.[51]

Traditional West African rituals emphasize song and dance, and the main objective of these rituals is to become possessed by a god. Through song and dance the worshipper, "who is either one of the initiates or is possessed by a deity . . . merges his identity in that of the god, . . ."[52] Under the possession of the god, the worshipper is unable to control his behavior until he comes out of his seizure. The accompaniment of a drum, rattle, and singing and handclapping of the chorus is essential for possession to ensue.[53]

> As a rule, possession comes on at some ceremony where a follower of god is moved by the singing, dancing, and drumming of a group of which he is a member; the god "comes to his head," he loses consciousness, becomes the deity, and until his release dances or performs after the fashion of the spirit who has taken possession of him.[54]

Since dance is an integral part of West African rituals, the shouting tradition practiced by slaves represented the continuation of a concept associated with these rituals.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF BLACK FOLK SPIRITUALS

Black folk spirituals were transformed into Europeanized choral songs by college choirs of southern black institutions. As an attempt to preserve the "spiritual legacy" in a form that was compatible with Euro-American musical tastes, these songs were arranged and sung in the vocal style associated with the European tradition of "art" music.[55] Authenticity, according to James Weldon and J. Rosamond Johnson, was maintained through the performance style which includ-

ed and emphasized the following: (1) the correct pronunciation of words based on principles relating to black dialect rather than standard English; (2) the use of call-response structures; (3) the use of harmony; (4) the capacity to *feel* these songs rather than to rely solely on artistic technique recognizing that feeling is dependent upon the knowledge of the origin and history of the spiritual tradition; (5) the inclusion of the "swing," a subtle and elusive movement that results from the swaying of head and body to mark the regular beat and, (6) the observance of rhythmic concepts that are African in origin. According to the Johnson brothers, rhythm, in spirituals, "takes control and completely dictates everything, including the adding or subtracting of syllables from words."[56]

In the 1870's the Fisk Jubilee Singers of Fisk University popularized the choral arrangements of black spirituals throughout the world with successful tours in the United States and Europe. The success of this group prompted other black institutions to establish similar groups. This tradition of spiritual singing has been maintained to present day and can be heard in universities, colleges, high schools and in black churches throughout the nation.

The black folk spiritual tradition was preserved in another Western form by black nationalistic composers of the 20th century. Harry Burleigh, composer, arranger and concert singer was the first to arrange and perform these spirituals in the style of the European art song for solo voice. His 1916 arrangement and performance of "Deep River" provided the model for others to follow. "After Burleigh, many concert singers developed the tradition of closing their recitals with a group of Negro spirituals . . ."[57] Other black composers, including Clarence Cameron White, R. Nathaniel Dett, John Wesley Work, Sr., James Weldon and J. Rosamond Johnson, William Dawson, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, William Grant Still and Undine Smith Moore among others, wrote vocal and instrumental arrangements of folk spirituals, in addition to utilizing them as thematic material for vocal and instrumental compositions.

THE 20TH CENTURY BLACK FOLK CHURCH AND BLACK GOSPEL MUSIC

For about three quarters of a century after the emancipation of slaves, freed blacks continued to engage in black religious practices that had characterized "praise house" meetings of slaves. The 20th century form of the plantation "praise house" is known as the black folk church. This church, associated with Holiness, Pentecostal, and such independent black denominations as the Primitive Baptist ("Old Baptist"), was distinguished by practices of spirit possessions, shouts,

chanted sermons, the feeling of familiarity with God and the ancient heroes, and the communal setting in which songs were created and re-created. As summed up by Levine, black "religion continued to be prized for the justice it brought to a world that lacked it."[58]

Black folk spirituals remained a vital force in the continued evolution of Afro-American religious music. By 1900, these spirituals were being transformed into another form of religious expression — black gospel. As explained by Pearl Williams-Jones, black religious music in the 20th century black folk church

> is spiritually, aesthetically, and philosophically representative of the community from which it comes. It reflects the traditional cultural values of Black folk life as it has evolved since slave days, and is a cumulative expression of the Black experience.
>
> The traditional liturgical forms of plainchant, chorales and anthems do not fulfill the needs of traditional Black folk religious worship and ritual. They are unrelated and inappropriate as vehicles for folk-style religious worship services because liturgical musical forms do not represent the dominant cultural values of the Black community. These values encompass the whole gamut of Black expressiveness — which is relevant to the ritual of Black folk-style worship — singing and preaching, linguistics, testifying and praying. They are unique, personal and highly valued within the community for their aesthetic value.[59]

In the black folk church, folk spirituals, reinterpreted revival hymns, lined-out hymns and free-style collective improvisation remained integral parts of the service. These songs, referred to as "church songs," continued to be interwoven into the chanted and sung sermons of black preachers. The intense atmosphere of the service was heightened through the use of handclapping and footstomping combined with the tambourine, drums and hoc instruments, piano, a variety of horns and later the Hammond organ for accompaniment. The use of these instruments as an essential part of religious rituals in the 20th century black folk church, contributed to the emergence of black gospel and served to distinguish this musical tradition from the spiritual tradition.[60]

Although the foundation for present day black gospel was established in Holiness churches at the turn of the century, it was introduced to denominational churches as composed music by Thomas A. Dorsey. Dorsey, a Baptist, credits the Methodist minister, Charles A. Tindley as being the originator of composed gospel. "In 1900, Tindley began composing new songs by setting hymnbook-like verses to tunes and rhythms of "church songs."[61] Thomas Dorsey, a former blues and jazz pianist, developed Tindley's gospel prototype into a distinct style that divorced it from the spiritual and hymn traditions. His melodic structures and patterns are derived from the blues tradition and the accompanying piano style incorporates the harmonies,

melodic motifs and ragtime/boogie woogie rhythms from the jazz and blues idioms. John W. Work condensed the contributions of Dorsey in the establishment of a black gospel tradition by saying" . . . while Mr. Dorsey brought to the religious songs rhythmic and melodic patterns taken from the secular works, he nevertheless brought also an intense religious devotion to them."[62] By the 1930's, gospel music had begun to infiltrate black Baptist and Methodist churches and, in the 1970's, Catholic parishes with sizeable black memberships followed suit.

Textual themes in composed black gospel mirror messages communicated in sermons of black preachers. They express a belief in the teachings and powers of Jesus Christ. Emphasis is placed on the earthly relationship between God and man rather than Biblical themes from the Old Testament that dominate spirituals. Many gospel songs convey the message that man's worldly problems, troubles, sorrows, and burdens can be overcome by having faith and believing in Jesus Christ. The gospel song of "I Can Make It" illustrates the nature of text associated with black gospel.

Chorus:

I can make it, when I'm talked about.
I can make it, when I'm alone.
I found out if I have Jesus, I can make it;
I don't need nobody else.

Verses:

Without a mother, without a father,
Without a sister oh, without a brother,
Jesus said, if I'm for you,
I'll be more than the whole world against you.
You can make it, thro' hard trials,
You can make it, when you're alone.
I found out if I have Jesus, I can make it;
I don't need nobody else.

When I'm tired and so distressed,
And I know not what to do.
I have found in my time of need,
That the Lord would see me thro'!
He will turn my nights into day,
And go with me all the way;
That's why I know, if I have Jesus, I can make it;
I don't need nobody else.[63]

Through gospel, blacks were able to verbalize ideas, attitudes and religious beliefs that corresponded to the 20th century black experience.

Although many gospel songs are composed, the large and varied body of gospel music embraces many traditions and styles extending

from spirituals, hymns, and blues to contemporary jazz, pop, soul, ballads, funk and disco. Spirituals and hymns have been rearranged, adapted and performed in a variety of gospel styles. The inclusion of contemporary secular genres in the gospel tradition results from the influence gospel has had on the development of black forms of popular music. The adaptation of popular songs to the gospel idiom only necessitated a change in text. In some cases, the text of popular songs conveyed a message which could be interpreted as religious from the outset. Such songs do not require any form of textual or stylistic changes in order to be performed as gospel. Gospel music continues to cross sacred/secular boundaries because of the expanded use of instruments, instrumental playing styles, and rhythms associated with contemporary forms of black popular music. Thus, it is possible to conclude that theory rather than practice had tended to separate the secular from the sacred musical tradition in the past and continues to do so in the present.

A successful performance of a black gospel depends upon the ability of performers to interpret and to improvise both musically and textually. Although gospel songs exist in published form, printed music merely provides the text and a skeletal outline of the melodic contour and harmonies "One has only to listen to the recorded repertory of gospel song to realize that gospel singers rarely sang a song precisely the same way twice and never sang it according to its exact musical notation. Each rendition was a new creation."[64] Individual interpretations of gospel vary but they all employ the musical vocabulary, technical devices and performance practices understood and valuled by black people.

> Much emphasis is placed on the use of melodic and textual repetition and variation. Vocal melodies, composed of motifs, are developed through the use of moans, grunts, wails, shouts, cries, gliding pitches, song-speech utterances, and verbal interjections. In increasing the emotional intensity of their performances, gospel singers often employ other devices, including sudden changes in vocal register or dynamics, breathing between words or in the middle of phrases, and the production of breathiness or airy tones."

These components represent the preservation and elaboration of trends that define the spiritual tradition. The interpretation of gospel performers influences the nature of the accompaniment. Instrumentalists, although provided with printed music, improvise in a style that compliments and supports vocalists. Their personalized styles highlight melodic and harmonic figurations rather than the original melody; their percussive and rhythmic approach to playing establishes an intensity that is essential to a successful gospel performance.

Performances of gospel music are not restricted to choirs. Any gospel song may be performed in traditional or contemporary styles

by an individual, duo, trio, quartet, group, or congregation. In some churches, gospel is sung as an integral part of the worship by the entire congregation while in others, it is performed by a choir at designated places in the religiouis service. In the case of the latter, the congregation participates through its musical, verbal and physical responses to the choirs' presentation. In both contexts, individuals or smaller groups often are featured in gospel renditions. Gospel music has become such a vital form of black religious expression that its vocal and accompanying instrumental styles have been applied to other non-black forms of religious music. In many denominational black churches, for example, hymn singing is accompanied by the harmonies and rhythms of the gospel piano and organ. The basic hymn melody is elaborated freely upon by individual congregational members.

The nature of the 20th century black church has accomodated continuity and change in the Afro-American religious musical tradition. As a conservative institution, it allowed for the preservation of cultural characteristics and the musical tradition of folk spirituals that was established by slaves in the 18th century. Its acceptance of cultural change contributed to the present day popularity of choral and art song arrangements of folk spirituals. Its ability to link the past with the present encouraged the development of a black gospel tradition that maintained traditional forms of black religious music and at the same time permitted the creation of new forms and styles of religious music. The large and diverse repertoire of music that constitutes the Afro-American religious tradition therefore, exposes the creative output of black America and the fundamental values that define the nature of black culture.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Portia K. Maultsby, "Music of Northern Independent Black Churches During the Ante-Bellum Period," *Journal of the Society for Ethnomusicology,* XIX (September 1975), pp. 401-418; Pearl Williams-Jones, "The Musical Quality of Black Religious Folk Ritual," *Spirit,* I (1977), pp. 21-30.

[2]Morgan Godwin, *The Negro's & Indian's Advocate, Suing for Their Admission into the Church: or a Persuasive to the Instructing and Baptizing of the Negro's (sic) and Indians in our Plantations* . . .(London: Printed by F.C., 1680, p. 33.

[3]For detailed descriptions of these activities, see Dena J. Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1977).

[4]Dena Epstein, "Slave Music in the United States before 1860. A Survey of Sources," *Music Library Association Notes,* (1963), pp. 198-99.

[5]Charles C. Jones *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States* (Savannah: T. Purse, 1842), p. 21.

[6]*Ibid.*

[7]William Pope Harrison, ed., *The Gospel Among the Slaves* (Nashville: Publishing House of the M.E. Church, 1893), p. 159.

[8]Kenneth Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1956), p. 157; Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (New York: Anchor Press, 1973), p. 34.

[9]Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution,* p. 161.

[10]*Ibid.*

[11]Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church.* 2nd ed. (Washington, D. C.: The Associated Publishers, 1921), p. 96.

[12]Jones, *The Religious Instruction,* p. 176.

[13]*Ibid.;* Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution,* pp. 159-160.

[14]Milton C. Sernett, *Black Religion and American Evangelicalism,* (Metuchen, N. J.: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., and the American Theological Library Association, 1975), p. 67.

[15]Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution,* pp. 159-160; Sernett, *Black Religion and American Evangelicalism,* pp. 59-81.

[16]Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 45.

[17]Franklin E. Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), p. 12.

[18]Melville, J. Herskovits,*The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press 1958), p. 207.

[19]Newbell N. Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1926) p. 545.

[20]Richard A. Waterman, "African Patterns in Trinidad Negro Music," (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1943), p. 27.

[21]Herskovits, *The Myth,* p. 74.

[22]*Ibid.,* p. 214.

[23]*Ibid,* pp. 70-71.

[24]*Ibid.,* p. 84.

[25]*Ibid.,* p. 214.

[26]*Ibid.,* pp. 214-15.

[27]Waterman, "African Patterns . . ." p. 33.

[28]*Ibid.,* P. 27.

[29]Quoted by Sernett, *Black Religion,* p. 97.

[30]Sernett, *Black Religion,* pp. 94-101.

[31]Frazier, *The Negro Church,* pp. 17-18.

[32]Robert Baird, *Religion in the United States of America. Or an Account of the Evangelical Churches in the United States* (Glasgow: Blackie and Son, 1844), p. 77.

[33]Quoted by Epstein, *Sinful Tunes,* p. 202.

[34]*Ibid.,* p. 203.

[35]Eliza Frances Andrews, *The War-time Journal of a Georgia Girl, 1864-1865,* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1908), pp. 89-91; W.E.B. DuBois, "The Sorrow Songs," in *Souls of Black Folk* (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publication, Inc., 1961. First published in Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Co., 1903), pp. 181-190.

[36]Epstein, *Sinful Tunes,* pp. 217-237.

[37]*Ibid.,* pp. 236, 220, 228; Epstein, "Slave Music . . .," pp. 203-205; Jones, *The Religious Instruction,* p. 266.

[38]Portia K. Maultsby, "Influences and Retentions of West African Musical Concepts in U.S. Black Music," *The Western Journal of Black Studies,* III (Fall 1979), p. 201.

[39]Elizabeth Kilham, "Sketches in Color: IV," in *The Negro and His Folklore.* ed. Bruce Jackson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967), p. 123.

[40]Levine, *Black Culture* p. 3-55; John Taylor, "Somethin' On My Mind: A Cultural and Historical Interpretation of Spiritual Texts," *Journal of the Society for Ethnomusicology* XIX (September 1975), pp. 387-398.

[41]Joseph Washington, *Black Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 214.

[42]*Ibid.*, pp. 214-15.

[43]*Ibid.*, p. 217.

[44]Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1971), p. 192.

[45]Gilbert Chase, *America's Music from the Pilgrims to the Present.* 2nd revised edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), p. 235.

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[47]*Ibid.*, p. 193.

[48]L. Patterson, *The Negro in Music and Art* (New York: Publishers Co., 1967), pp. 6-7.

[49]Maultsby, "Influences and Retentions" p. 201.

[50]W. F. Allen and others, *Slave Songs of the United States* (New York: A. Simpson and Co., 1867) p. xiv.

[51]*Ibid.*

[52]Herskovits, *The Myth,* p. 215.

[53]*Ibid.*

[54]*Ibid.*

[55]Levine, *Black Culture,* pp. 166-167.

[56]James Weldon Johnson & J. Rosamond Johnson, *The Books of American Negro Spirituals* (New York: Viking Press, 1969. First printing 1925), pp. 11-50.

[57]Southern, *The Music of Black Americans,* p. 287.

[58]Levine, *Black Culture,* pp. 158-159.

[59]William-Jones, "The Musical Quality" p. 21.

[60]Maultsby, "Influences and Retentions" p. 204.

[61]Horace Boyer, "Gospel Music," *Music Educators Journal,* LXIV (May 1978), p. 37.

[62]John W. Work, "Changing Patterns in Negro Folk Songs," *Journal of American Folklord* 62 (January-March 1949), p. 142.

[63]Words by Loyd Legins, *Roberta Martin Album Special* (Published by The Roberta Martin Studio of Music, 1308 E. 47th Street, Chicago, Illinois). p. 18.

[64]Levine, *Black Culture,* p. 186.

[65]Maultsby, "Influences and Retentions" p. 204.

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